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ABSTRACT

A program at Staten Island Community College called "heating up" is designed to help students take control of their own education. The program asks each first-semester student to join an Educational Development Seminar (EDS), which meets once a week for an extended period of time, and includes 15 to 20 students and a faculty leader or facilitator. The objective of EDS, initially, is to help the students understand that their presence at a community college is not because of inherent limitations but rather the result of class, ethnicity, and the inadequacies of their prior schooling. Once the student understands how he has previously accepted failure, he can then learn to accept success. The dramatic breakthroughs needed to close the large gaps in reading, mathematics, and writing abilities of the students can occur regularly only when the motivation of the student is strong enough. (DB)

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THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE AND THE COMMUNITY

Heating-Up vs. Cooling Out

L. Steven Zwerling

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THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE AND THE COMMUNITY

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The community college came into the world as the junior college; and although the early junior college saw itself serving the needs of a local community, its primary source of academic vision was the university. For what it offered then, at the turn of the twentieth century, paralleled the first two years of college work. Thus it was with a certain pride that these two-year extensions of high school (that's how they generally began) called themselves junior colleges. Their notion of community service in the early days essentially involved their geographic location (they were easier for citizens to get to than the more remote senior colleges and universities) and their low cost (they were either free or charged very little, and since students could live at home and commute to school there were room and board costs to be saved as well).[1] Still today, it is felt, these are important community-serving functions of two-year colleges; the recent Carnegie Commission on Higher Education, for example, calls for the establishment of between 230 and 280 new two-year colleges by 1980 (for a total of about 1,400) so that low-cost higher education will be within commuting distance of "every potential student" in America.[2]

But through the years junior colleges took for themselves a larger role in the name of community service. First came their "terminal" or vocational education function. If the truth be told, this role, in relatively latent form, was present from the beginning. Some of the founding fathers of the junior college movement (who were primarily interested in freeing the university of the obligation of offering freshmen and sophomore studies so that the university could assume a "pure" Germanic form and concentrate on professional studies

and academic research), many early proponents of two-year colleges saw training in the "mechanical arts" to be a valid part of the junior college curriculum--particularly since the land-grant colleges had moved away from offering such training during their efforts to upgrade themselves and alter their agricultural-mechanical image.[3] In some states the terminal idea took hold and programs serving the needs of local industry filled junior college catalogs. At a Texas junior college, one was likely to find a Petroleum Technology curriculum. In New York City, a program in Textile Technology. And in Florida, curricula reflecting their tourist and citrus industries. But in spite of what has been a remarkable proliferation of such vocational programs, it has always bedeviled the two-year college movement that only a quarter of their students ever seem to enroll in them. The other 75 percent proclaim their aspirations to involve nothing less than the B.A. (The fact that a very small percent of this percent make it, bedeviles them less. The problem always seems to be how to get these terminal-students-who-don't-know-they're-terminal-students to switch over to more "realistic" vocational curricula.)

Next came the junior college's unabashedly community function--and an accompanying change of name. When the so-called Truman Commission issued its six volume report in 1948, not only did they propose the then revolutionary idea that 49 percent of the population was capable of 14 years of formal education and that all economic and racial barriers should be removed so that young people could get it; they also proposed that two-year colleges open their doors to adults in the community seeking a course or two, a certificate program for job upgrading, or just some cultural enrichment. It was truely the beginning of what William Birenbaum has called "something for everybody." The community college quickly became the place in America where every problem--national

or local--found itself the subject of a course or program. When the nation discovered the threat to the environment, my community college devised an Environmental Health Technology program. I suspect at this moment, someplace in America a community college faculty committee is designing an Energy Technology curriculum to deal with the current Energy Crises.

All of this may sound rather benign, perhaps even socially progressive. But again to quote my friend, Bill Birenbaum, "something for everybody is not enough."[4] Worse yet, something for everybody--the community colleges' community functions--may be just enough to mask their socially regressive role.

To begin with, it is well known that community colleges enroll a disproportionate percentage of students from low socioeconomic or minority group backgrounds. Many see this to be a major justification for their existence--their vaunted democratizing function. I am, however, equally interested in what happens to these students who have been given this opportunity. Among others, the Folger Commission discovered that when you compare an academically equivalent sample of transfer students who begin college at a two-year college with similar groups who begin as freshmen at a four-year college, the community college BA-aspirants are less than half as likely to go on to receive the BA as the senior-college students.[5] In other words, it appears, just the fact of going to a community college thwarts a student's academic chances. Folger, et al, feel that some of this may be because two-year college students are either less motivated to go on (in spite of their aspirations) or can't deal with the financial burden of attending even a low tuition college. Undoubtedly some of this is true.

I am convinced, however, that the staggering attrition rate at community colleges (Charles Monroe says a two-year college is doing

very well if half its students return for a second semester[6]), that a high rate attrition itself is one of the community colleges' major unacknowledged functions. Folger again tells us that if all low socio-economic status students with the equivalent ability of the more affluent students who complete baccalaureates were also to complete BA's, American higher education would turn out at least twice as many college graduates than as at present. Then what would we do with them all? Send them on to apply to increasingly selective graduate schools? Send them out to hunt for jobs that don't exist? Ask them to be content with the intrinsic rewards of a liberal education? Actually, none of the above. Because as things currently stand, with community colleges--to quote Jencks & Reisman--acting as the safety value for the higher educational system, the vast majority of these students will never get their baccalaureates, and we will never have to provide answers to those questions.[7]

California, for example, with perhaps the nation's most fully developed system of higher educational opportunities, boasts that more than 70 percent of its high school graduates go on to one form of college or another; but California also must deal with the fact that it has the nation's second lowest rate of college-age students going on to receive baccalaureates.[8] In California, as elsewhere, money talks. And what it says is that California's three-tiered system of higher education is socioeconomically stratified. Using data from the mid-1960's, Lee Hansen & Burton Weisbrod in economic terms have documented precisely how this works. First, the poorest students ($8,800 mediam family income) are found in California's junior colleges; more affluent students ($10,000 mediam income) are found in the middle-level state colleges; and the richest ($12,000 median income) are found in the elite university colleges such as Berkeley. Second, the average number of years these students remain in college parallels this overall structure--1.2 years

for junior college students, 2.6 for state college, and 2.8 for university college students. Third, 55 percent of entering university college students finish their BA's, 50 percent of state college students, but only 8 percent of junior college students ever go on for BA's. Fourth, when you add to this the fact that future earning capacity is dramatically improved only for persons with four or more years of college and only marginally affected by "some college" (only a 4 percent increase over a high school graduate's earnings as opposed to a 34 percent increase if you get a BA); and then finally, fifth, when you calculate the amount of taxes each economic group contributes to support higher education against the monetary benefits they derive in the form of tuition subsidies and increased earning capacity, the "net transfer" is only significant for the groups that attend the four-year colleges (+ $40 per year for junior college students, + $630 for state college, and + $790 per year for university college students).[9]

Obviously, a funny thing happens to most students on the way from the open door to the degree. Obviously, also, the B.A. should not be considered to be the ultimate expression of the value of higher education. But it's difficult to tell this to the son of a sanitation worker who has come to see the B.A. as his ticket for getting out from behind the truck. Or to the daughter of an inner city mother of five who sees it as her ticket to becoming a teacher.

So how, you may ask, do we serve the community any better at Staten Island Community College. I'm not certain that we do, but here at least is what we're attempting. To begin with, we feel it is essential that the old "cooling-out," which attempts to pursuade community college students to choose more realistic careers for themselves (terminal rather than transfer curricula), must be replaced by a new "heating-up," which helps students understand that if in the past they have not been con-

sidered to be "college material" it may not entirely have been their own fault. It may be they were caught up in an educational process that was more concerned with channeling them into middle-level jobs than with facilitating the development of their true academic potential.

At Staten Island Community College, heating-up hopefully occurs within an integrated academic curriculum which includes asking each first semester student to join an Educational Development Seminar (E.D.S.). Examining and stimulating motivation is the function of the E.D.S. It meets once a week for an extended period of time and includes 15-20 students and a faculty leader or facilitator. The objective of the E.D.S. initially is to help students understand how they got where they are--that their presence at a community college is more the result of class, ethnicity, and the inadequacies of their prior schooling than it is the fault of their own inherent limitations. Once they understand this, they begin to stop blaming themselves. This helps build the self confidence which is essential to making ambitious but strategically sound plans for their future education and careers. Perhaps for the first time in their lives, E.D.S. students begin to take control of their own education and hence their own destiny.

Unless, though, the E.D.S. begins with the way we <u>feel</u> about our own histories and goes from affective exploration to cognitive and rational understanding, it is no more than a new version of a familiar academic exercise. What we do assumes a powerful affective environment in schools that often goes unacknowledged but which must, as with the social and political roles of schools, be made explicit and put to work serving the release rather than the containment of our students' potential. If the cafeteria in an overcrowded community college is a pigsty (as so many are), it teaches students something negative about themselves. If the bookstore refuses to stock anything other

than required texts, it teaches students something about how the community college regards their academic potential. If some of their professors at an open faculty meeting refer to them as "semi-illiterates," this too teaches students a way of regarding themselves. It is unlikely that all of this will be changed. At the least, students, via E.D.S.'s and affective learning must come to be able to perceive the hidden messages and thus learn to protect themselves.

E.D.S.'s also help our students validate many of their own prior experiences. The academic world reflects upper middle-class values and values upper middle-class culture. Community college students often feel put down or alienated by this kind of exclusive environment. Validating working-class culture via affective learning at Staten Island does not mean a different kind of exclusiveness (though at times I see this happening encouraged by a mis-directed radicalism): it means a cultural balance within which all people can have a chance to feel good about themselves.

But what about basic academic skills? Isn't it a luxury to "feel good" about yourself when you can't read or write? True, in basic skills many community college students start considerably behind their senior college counterparts. Also true is the painful admission that various forms of college-level remedial or compensatory education have failed. Projected failure and dropout rates for the City University of New York's community college open admissions students run as high as 80 percent during their first two college years--this in spite of an unprecedented commitment to tutoring, counseling, etc.[10] We contend that a successful skills program depends upon a successful affective learning program. The first step is to help students understand how they have previously accepted failure; then students can learn to accept success. To close the large gaps in reading, math, and writing

(often four or five years' worth), dramatic breakthroughs are required. Gaining eight months in measured reading skill in four or five months (good progress) is hardly good enough. We have found that only when motivation is powerful can these breakthroughs occur regularly. Thus our concept of community service, albiet a sketch of what we in fact try to do.

The rhetoric of the two-year college movement is fine; rarely, though, has the reality lived up to it. Now that the movement has moved through its formative, vocational education, and open-access stages, it is time perhaps to dedicate a new period of development in which we concentrate on <u>what really happens to the students</u>. It is time that the notion of accountability spreads from the lower schools to the community colleges.

FOOTNOTES

1. The most comprehensive history of the formative days of the junior college is still William Crosby Eells, The Junior College, Houghton-Mifflin, Boston, 1931.

2. The Open Door Colleges: Policies for Community Colleges, McGraw-Hill, N.Y., June 1970, pp. 35ff.

3. A fine brief history of vocational education at the college level may be found in Grant Venn's Man, Education, and Work: Post-secondary Vocational & Technical Education, American Council on Education, Washington, D.C., 1964.

4. William M. Birenbaum, Something for Everybody Is Not Enough, Random House, N.Y., 1971.

5. John Folger, Helen Astin, Alan Bayer, Human Resources & Higher Education, Russell Sage Foundation, N.Y., 1970, pp. 175-177.

6. Profile of the Community College, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, 1972, p. 208.

7. The Academic Revolution, Doubleday, N.Y., 1968, p. 492.

8. A.J. Jaffee and Walter Adams, "Two Models of Open Enrollment," in Universal Higher Education: Costs, Benefits, Options, American Council on Education, Washington, D.C., 1972, p. 231.

9. W. Lee Hansen and Burton Weisbrod, Benefits, Costs & Finance of Public Higher Education, Markham, Chicago, 1969. Analyses of more recent data reach similar conclusions. For example, the Carnegie Commission Report, Higher Education: Who Pays? Who Benefits? Who Should Pay?, McGraw-Hill, N.Y., June 1973. My article on the Economics of Inequality is a brief but hopefully comprehensive look at the subject. (School Review, Vol. 81, August 1973, pp. 643-649.)

10. See Joe Rempson's "Minority Access to Higher Education in New York City," The City Almanac, August 1972, p. 12.

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